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5 Minutes of Puppy Fame

From Death Row to TV Show Sparky Helps Rescue Homeless Dogs

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On Thursday afternoon, Jan. 13, Sparky was energetic, carefree and ready to pounce on anyone unfamiliar so she could spread her puppy love with warm licks on the face. In fact, she was so happy, it was as if she knew she was going to appear on Channel 12's "Pet Talk" program.

"She's calmed down a bit," said Rick Arruzza, who found Sparky on April 24, 1998 through Adopt-A-Dog, a non-profit organization that began in Greenwich.

"When we first got her she would be in your face a lot more. She'd still be jumping on you right now. I thought she'd grow out of it, but I think after all she's been through I just think she's happy to be alive," he said.

On Jan. 22 and 23 Sparky will have her five minutes of fame to share her heartwarming story with viewers and have fun doing it.

"Pet Talk is an upbeat and fun show about pets and animals," said Lauren Collier, host of the show that features local animals, pets and pet owners from Southwestern Connecticut.

This may be Sparky's television debut, but she is no stranger to publicity. Arruzza, 46, has been sharing Sparky's adventures through children's books, and he donates \$1 per book sold to Adopt-A-Dog, so it can help more dogs and cats find a safe home.

Arruzza's five-minute segment will include a group of local kids (Sparky's fans) that will listen to a reading from one of the books and include background on how Sparky was rescued from being euthanized in a New York City animal shelter.

"It's a great story," said Collier. "I love the whole idea that Rick helped save this dog from death row who turned out to be so wonderful."

Sparky's Rescue

The pointer/pit bull mix would not have lived to be 6 ½ years old if it weren't for an unknown worker at a Harlem dog shelter who kept Sparky alive by changing her arrival date, hoping that she would be adopted before it was her time to get put to sleep.

"If it wasn't for that guardian angel in the kennel and Adopt-A-Dog, she wouldn't have been here and wouldn't have been able to help the other cats and dogs at Adopt-A-Dog," said Arruzza.

With millions of dogs being euthanized every year because of the enormous overflow, Marsha Biggar, adoptions manager at Adopt-A-Dog, said, "We take dogs from anywhere that are in trouble. We never have empty cages, we never have empty runs (to shelters), the name of the game is to save as many as possible." And that was the case with a white and black speckled Sparky, only one year old.

At the Center for Animal Care and Control (CACC), where Sparky was being held, the unknown worker asked Adopt-A-Dog to take one more special dog even though the van was already full. Biggar said she couldn't refuse.

"They put Sparky up front with the driver," said Arruzza, "and she liked the driver all the way back to Armonk, N.Y." That's where Adopt-A-Dog has a shelter that houses about 50 dogs and 60 cats until they are found homes.

"Sparky was one of the lucky ones," said Biggar who looked after Sparky until she was adopted. "She's a fabulous dog and there are hundreds of others just as nice as her dying every day. But some things are meant to be and she was meant to come to us and she was meant to go to Rick. He's a nice man, a good pet owner who has a nice family."

Biggar knows this because Arruzza used to be her neighbor.

Sparky's Books

"I'm really excited to be able to bring Sparky's story on TV and to a wider audience," said Arruzza.

"She's done a lot for a dog who was this close to being put to sleep," he added, lifting his hand from Sparky's belly to demonstrate how slim her chances of survival were with his pointer finger and thumb. "Which would have been a shame."

Sparky's adventures in her Stamford neighborhood were the subject of Arruzza's first soft-cover book, *Sparky's Walk*, which is filled with quick-paced rhymes and black and white illustrations (suitable for coloring) by Brooklyn artist Pilar Newton, whose work has been featured on Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network and MTV.

"One of the main reasons for the book was a thank you to Adopt-A-Dog for saving Sparky," said Arruzza, whose second book, *No Rest for Sparky*, was inspired by other animals in the Arruzza household, such as Speedy the tortoise and Oreo the hamster. As of September 2003 the books, which are also available in Spanish, have already raised nearly \$3,000.

Arruzza is preparing a third book about Sparky's travels across the United States. A longtime editor, Arruzza plans to include historic monuments, including Mount Rushmore, which Sparky will visit to give kids a lesson about U.S. geography and history.

"One of the main reasons I wrote the second book was because of the great reception that I got from students from across the country," said Arruzza, who travels to San Francisco, Miami and Greenwich to give readings at schools and bookstores.

It was during his travels that he got the idea from a student to have dogs from previous books make guest appearances on Sparky's adventures. "I'm probably going to use that idea," he said.

The third book is expected in September of this year. Arruzza said that he will try to come out with a book every September because it coincides with Adopt-A-Dog's annual "Puttin' On The Dog" show in Greenwich.

Sparky's Home

"We always say that we didn't choose Sparky, but she chose us," said Arruzza recalling how Sparky joined his family.

After growing up with a dog adopted from the Stamford Humane Society named Lucky, a 14-year-old who chased cats, and later Coal, a German Shepherd, Labrador mix adopted from the humane society that didn't take to children, it was time for a new dog.

They went to Best Friends Pet Resort & Salon in Norwalk when it was hosting adoption services for other rescue organizations, including Adopt-A-Dog. Arruzza said some dogs were physically there and others were represented in photographs. After he and his family saw a picture of Sparky, they learned that she was on site and they could see her.

"As soon as they brought Sparky out, she saw my son, knocked him to the floor, pinned him down and kept licking his face. We said, 'well, I guess we'll be taking Sparky.'"

Sparky can be seen on Channel 12 on Jan. 22 at 9 a.m., 1 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. and on Jan. 23 at 9 a.m. and 7:30 p.m. Sparky books are \$7.95 and available on www.sparkyswalk.com as well as amazon.com. Books are available in bookstores across the country. For locations, visit Sparky's Web site. For information about Adopt-A-Dog, visit www.adoptadog.org or to adopt a dog or cat from a shelter nearest you, visit www.petharbor.com.